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NUTRITION COMMITTEE NEWS

For exchange of information on nutrition education and school lunch activities

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NUTRITIONAL FITNESS FOR TEENAGERS

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Good nutrition and desirable eating habits along with physical and mental activity, rest and recreation, immunization and good health practices constitute the major building blocks for total fitness for everyone at every age. Because the President has issued an urgent directive to strengthen all programs that contribute to the fitness of our youth, responsible groups in communities across the Nation have addressed themselves to initiating or reinforcing nutrition programs for teenagers.

On request, we have met with some of these groups and considered a possible rationale for such programs. In this issue of NCN, we have pulled together highlights from these experiences in terms of present knowledge, identification of problems, and the use of knowledge from many areas in developing appropriate solutions and in presenting nutrition to adolescents.

NUTRITIONAL NEEDS AND CURRENT EATING PRACTICES

Nutritional Needs of Teenagers

Teenagers' requirements for nutrients other than calories are as high or higher than they will be at any time in their adult lives—with the exception of girls during periods of pregnancy and lactation. The need for calories may be correspondingly high but does vary with age, sex, body size, and particularly with activity.

It is difficult to be more specific because when nutritional needs are considered the word "teenager" encompasses several different groups with differing needs. For example, the needs of the 13-year-old boy are quite different from those of the 19-year-old girl. Those planning programs will need to tailor the content to the needs of the particular age and sex of the group.

Eating Habits of Teenagers

Many of our teenagers are well nourished because they have been provided with good diets by enlightened parents and have had repeated experience with good practices at home and, in many instances, in school lunch programs.

Many others, particularly girls, are underfed because in their desire to have good figures, they skip some meals and choose others unwisely. Not only do they cut calories, but they shortchange themselves in other nutrients as well. When this occurs, the shortages are most often in calcium, vitamin C, and vitamin A.

Some, because of adolescent psychological problems, are overfed on calories, but still may not be getting all the other nutrients in adequate amounts. Educational approaches have a limited potential for success in such instances until the psychological problems are resolved. Boys and girls with suspected problems of this nature should be referred to the proper authorities for help.

Studies show that many school children from about the sixth grade on, either skip breakfast or eat a most inadequate meal. This poor practice tends to persist throughout the secondary school years.

Teenagers may rebel at meals served to them and depend heavily on getting their nutrients—particularly calories—from snacks. As far as we know, there is nothing nutritionally wrong with this practice if the selections are good.

Some young people may rebel at eating sterotyped meals and favor unusual food combinations. There is nothing nutritionally wrong with this, as far as we know, if their knowledge of food values is sufficient to guide them to select combinations that will supply the needed nutrients in adequate amounts.

CURRENT NUTRITIONAL PROBLEMS

Where Do They Begin?

Nutritionists and workers in allied professions are convinced that the good or poor food habits of teenagers have their beginnings much earlier. Many of the problems result not because of a sudden switch from good to poor

practices, but because borderline practices of earlier years persist and now fail to meet the increased requirements of adolescence. This is compounded by the fact that the interests and psychological needs of adolescence may be manifested in poor food habits if understanding and guidance are not available.

Problems Identified

(1) *How to convince young people who are well nourished* that they will not outgrow their need for good eating habits. Many have the idea that well-balanced meals are "kid stuff" and important only during the growth period. This group should be helped to recognize their own need for good nutrition in adulthood and their responsibility for setting a good example for the next generation.

(2) *How to convince teenagers who are not well fed* that eating the right kinds and amounts of food can affect performance and promote health and well-being without causing overweight.

Underfed girls frequently insist that they skip a meal in the morning because "breakfast makes me fat" or "breakfast makes me sick." Many of these girls seriously restrict their intake of important nutrients and consequently limit their health in the determination to maintain desirable weight. Programs to show these girls how to maintain trim figures and still be well nourished are being initiated in many communities.

(3) *How to demonstrate that good nutrition may be achieved with many combinations of food,* but all of these food combinations depend on knowledge—of requirements and of food composition—in terms of daily food intake. Many persons, including teenagers, associate good nutrition with foods they do not enjoy. We need to show this group that good nutrition can add to the joy of living and that well-liked foods can be a part of meals if we *know* how to select food combinations to meet our needs.

(4) *What shall we teach about snacks?* Are they nutritionally bad? Good? Can they be substituted for meals? Are foods that provide mostly calories bad for teenagers? Teenagers want to know why some people rarely sit down to what we call a "complete" or balanced meal and yet remain apparently healthy. We must answer these questions to their satisfaction if we wish them to accept our suggestions for eating patterns.

GUIDELINES TO SOLUTIONS

Approaches

Teaching nutrition cannot be delayed until the teen years. Teaching should begin in the home almost as soon as the child is born—should be continued in the home, in the community, and in the school—all the way through the school years. Successful programs of this nature have a potential for prevention of nutritional problems during the teen years.

We need to teach food selection in a positive way remembering that our requirements are not for specific foods, but for some 60-odd nutrients which can be supplied by some very unusual food combinations as well as by those that are more usual. We must demonstrate that total daily caloric intake is the food factor in weight control rather than the caloric value of any one food or any one meal. There are no fattening foods or slenderizing foods as such. Furthermore, food is not the only factor in weight control.

The more we know about the nutritive value of foods, the more freedom of choice we can exercise in choosing the foods we enjoy. With knowledge, we can choose food combinations we like that will supply the nutrients we need and still keep calories at desirable levels.

Implications for Programs

Chief characteristics. If this world provided an ideal climate for nutrition teaching, there would be no poor attitudes to be modified, no undesirable habits to be unlearned and replaced by good ones, no misinformation to be corrected, and no faddists preying on the public. Good nutrition would be a part of the joy of living because it would be a guide to good nutritional health through wise food selection. Individuals would then be better able to take advantage of the good things about them. It would be a continuing program based on adjusting nutrient intake to nutritional needs as the individual progresses through the life cycle.

Opportunities would be provided for individuals (1) to learn to enjoy a wide variety of foods and (2) to gain sufficient knowledge of nutrient requirements and food composition to choose diets for themselves that meet their needs from the variety of foods they like to eat. This same knowledge would tend to free people from the pressures of faddists to purchase unnecessary food supplements or "health" foods.

Our world, of course, does not present an ideal situation now. We find problems at every stage of the life cycle. These problems cannot be ignored because health at later stages in the cycle will be influenced by the way we do or do not cope with today's problems.

Any plan of action for a comprehensive (school and community) educational program needs, therefore, to be "two-pronged." One part, a long-term positive plan that encompasses the entire life cycle (placing teenage nutrition in its proper setting); and the second part, a program

geared to immediate, nutritional problems of a particular age group.

Administration of programs. To conduct either type of program, professional workers will need to:

- Know characteristics (in terms of physical and psychological growth and development) of each age group in the life cycle.
- Be familiar with the nutritional needs of each age group.
- Have a working knowledge of food composition.
- Have a facility in using positive educational approaches suitable to each group.
- Know where to get and how to use competent consultant help.

When programs need to be geared to the immediate problems of an age group—in this instance teenagers—specific characteristics of the age group must be taken into account. For example, we must recognize that these young people are striving for independence and that any approach that appears restrictive is a threat to this independence. Any activity we hope to conduct successfully should take this into account. For example, in working with a group whose food habits are poor, we should start with all the good things about their diets and build toward adequacy rather than emphasizing restriction of preferred foods.

Teenagers want the right to think and to choose for themselves. To prepare them for this freedom, it is our responsibility to help our youth to (1) understand the relation of the food they eat every day to their own health, (2) learn what the alternative choices are and what the consequences of these decisions may be, (3) to use sound knowledge of food selection to meet individual nutritional needs with foods the individual enjoys.

One way to do this is to involve our teenagers in activities where they need to think, to make choices, and to accept and be responsible for the consequences of their choices. If these activities are conducted in a permissive enough atmosphere, many young people will welcome guidance. One activity of this nature involves students in the menu planning of school lunches.

Young people should have the right to get their required nutrients from a wide variety of foods. Unusual food combinations, if they supply the nutrients in adequate amounts, need not be discouraged. In many instances, this is just a way boys and girls assert independence and, if adults are not horrified, they often quietly revert to established family eating patterns. We can hardly quarrel with the teenager who chooses tomato soup and a cheese sandwich for breakfast. If we can persuade her to add a glass of milk to this, she will have a pretty good start for the day.

What shall we teach about snacks? It has been our practice, as nutritionists, to encourage community leaders to emphasize the value of snacks that contribute something besides calories to the diet. We have suggested that candy bars, soft drinks, and the like do not need emphasis because teenagers will eat them anyway. Community leaders report that students direct emphasis to this area by the questions they ask. Questions cannot be ignored and should be answered accurately and realistically. What can we say about snacks when situations like this arise?

As adults, we may feel that candy bars, potato chips, and the like should be taboo and snacks should be confined to foods such as fruit, raw vegetables, cheese, milk, sandwiches, etc. This may be true for us because our caloric needs are, generally speaking, much lower than those of teenagers, particularly the boys. We may have to choose everything we eat to contribute to our needs for nutrients other than calories.

Active teenagers, however, may meet all other nutrient needs and still need more calories. If they choose to get these calories from sweets, for example, there is nothing nutritionally wrong with their choices. They should understand, however, that (1) sweets do present a danger to dental health, particularly if good oral hygiene is neglected, and (2) snacks cannot be considered outside the content of total daily food intake. Thus, what they should eat for snacks depends on what they will eat at other times during the day. Some days it may be nutritionally acceptable for them to choose candy bars while on other days, a glass of milk and a sandwich will be a much better choice.

Implications for Professional Workers

It is important that professional workers realize that no one group alone can expect to conduct the necessary school and community nutrition programs for all age groups. Many referrals may be needed. For example, they will need to refer to the nutritionists for interpretation of new knowledge as it is established, for advice on the nutritional accuracy of materials, and on what position to take concerning food supplements. There are times when physicians, dentists, nurses, welfare workers, and the like will be in the best position to provide assistance or advice.

The contribution that any professional worker can make to teenage programs will depend largely on the kind and extent of contact she has with young people. A school lunch manager with background in nutrition may be in a position to make continued and direct contributions to school nutrition programs. She can be an important member of a school health committee and may be the person best qualified to coordinate nutrition activities. She will need to make sure that all those presenting nutrition facts

(teachers of home economics and science, elementary teachers, nurses) are using accurate sources and consistent terminology. This practice will prevent misinterpretation.

It is wise to use a simple food pattern as a teaching tool and for all professionals working with the same group of teenagers to use the same tool. There are advantages to using the four food groups found in "Food for Fitness—a daily food guide." It is a good pattern, is easily available, and many publications and visuals are geared to it.

Dietitians in hospitals, clinics, public and voluntary agencies will, as a part of their job, have some opportunities to contribute to these overall programs. Their contributions are likely to be more effective if all workers in a community are familiar with the long range and immediate objectives as well as the general plans of procedures, emphases, and visuals.

PRESENTING NUTRITION TO TEENAGERS

Motivating Interest

The desire to make decisions—to control environment—is a normal characteristic of maturation. Teenagers must be permitted to "try their wings" in this area. This can best be accomplished in situations where guidance is available but not obvious.

One way to introduce nutrition to teenagers is to indicate that they should have the freedom to make some decisions concerning how much and what kind of food they will eat —particularly in the selection of meals eaten away from home. Like every other freedom, this one carries responsibility to know how to choose wisely. The choices a boy makes may influence whether or not he becomes the kind of person he wants to be in terms of physique and the ability to be active. For the girl, it would probably be in terms of an attractive appearance, including a trim figure.

Adults working with teenagers will need to emphasize that all of us—adults and teenagers alike—need guidance in many phases of living and learning. Many teenagers need guidance in this whole area of achieving and maintaining a high level of health. Healthy young people can put their best into living and assure themselves a full life.

A good first activity is to have the group list favorite foods and then quickly demonstrate how other foods can be combined with them (no matter how "off-beat" they are) to make an acceptable meal. This activity provides these excellent teaching points which can serve as "springboards" for further teaching.

1. You can eat the foods you like—good nutrition is not synonymous with unpalatable foods.
2. You can do this safely *only* if you put forth the effort to learn your nutritional needs and the food sources that will supply them.
3. Wise food selection is not difficult if you start with a reliable food guide.
4. The greater the variety of foods you have learned to eat with enjoyment, the easier it is to choose adequate meals you will like.
5. The more you know about the nutritive value of foods, the greater your freedom of choice.

Conducting A Program

During the first activity, the teacher will have an opportunity to observe the group reaction and note obvious needs. She may learn that activities are needed to convince these teenagers that food really does make a difference in the general well-being of individuals. It may be discovered that opportunities should be provided for these individuals to do some meal planning that will actually be used. In a school program, it may be meal planning for the school lunch which takes into account some factors that influence school menu planning.

For example, a student committee may plan a school lunch menu. Students will plan to (1) meet Type-A standards, (2) stay within the budget, and (3) take into account available foods and cooking facilities. These students should also eat the lunch and be prepared to defend their choices to any classmates who offer complaints.

Programs made up of activities which (1) involve the teenagers, (2) provide numerous opportunities to make decisions based on sound information, and (3) require the young people to live with the consequences of these decisions have proved most meaningful.

IN CONCLUSION

In working with adolescents, we must remember that this is a difficult period of life for them. The big lesson for them to learn is that with every freedom—large or small—comes responsibility. Freedom to eat the foods they particularly like carries with it the responsibility to learn how to combine these foods with others to achieve a diet that will meet their nutritional needs.

We must have faith in our young people. If we do our job well and help them to learn this lesson, many of them will willingly accept the challenges we offer. In this way, we may one day help all our people to select diets from our varied and abundant food supply that will promote a level of health conducive to greatest productivity and creativity.

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